

Siblings of children with a disability make a unique contribution to the family unit and also need attention, understanding and support.

Siblings find it difficult to understand why their brother or sister at times receives more of your attention. It is important to clearly explain that because of their disability, their sibling sometimes needs extra help and that this takes time. Be sure to reassure them that any extra help they provide is appreciated and they are loved equally.

It is very common for siblings to have difficulty understanding what the disability means for their sibling. Coupled with that, they often do not understand why there are differing parental expectations – particularly with younger children.

Recent findings suggest regardless of birth order or age, the sibling of a child with a disability often takes on a caring and protecting role. This kind of relationship may also lead to anxieties about their future relationship with their sibling. This is particularly the case for children whose siblings are less independent.

Siblings' Feelings

In ALL families, siblings experience a range of feelings about their brothers and sisters. These feelings can differ from moment to moment and range from negative through to positive. This is also true for families who have children with a disability. Acknowledging and talking about all feelings is very important.

Strategies for supporting siblings

Encourage communication

Without open communication, everyone in the family becomes caught up in protecting other family members from their real feelings. If children feel listened to and understood, they have a greater capacity to cope with stress.

Acknowledge and validate feelings

Once children know that it is okay to experience the feelings they have, they need to be taught appropriate ways of dealing with and expressing these feelings.

Help all children feel special and valued

It is easy for a sibling to perceive that the child with a disability is more important and more loved. Be aware of the extra attention provided to the child with disability. To help siblings, try to make time for them one-on-one, e.g. an uninterrupted bedtime story, acknowledge the achievements and strengths of all children and discuss why and when there is a need for differences in parenting styles with the sibling and child with a disability.

Acknowledge and value the care given by a sibling

When a sibling helps out either at home or school, it is important to acknowledge their contribution. For instance, playing with their brother or sister with autism is a contribution that is often overlooked. Not only does it give parents a break to do other things, but it also provides a learning experience for the child with a disability, and an opportunity to strengthen the sibling relationship.

Encourage independence in a sibling

Siblings sometimes need help and permission to develop goals for themselves and move towards independence. You can do this by allowing your child to have their own space at times. Encourage activities and interests outside the family so the child can establish their own social networks and independence. Also, help your child to share their thoughts, ideas and needs.

Prepare siblings for the reactions of others

The reality of life is that people may stare, tease and ask questions about your child with a disability. You can support your other children to manage this by equipping them with knowledge, understanding of the situation and responses they can give others. Modelling appropriate responses and addressing bullying situations if they arise is an excellent way of reinforcing this.

